

CLAIMS

1. Parcel-franking apparatus, characterized in that it comprises:

- a plurality of lockers (2) designed to contain parcels and each provided with a door (3);
- a management unit (11);
- locks (4) each adapted to lock a respective door and each controlled individually by the management unit;
- door position detectors (5), each associated with a respective door and adapted to inform the management unit when the corresponding door is closed;
- at least one weight sensor (9a, 9b) adapted to transmit to the management unit an indication of the weight of a parcel placed in one or other of the lockers; and

- display means (12), data input means (14), and payment means (16), all these means being connected to the management unit;

and characterized in that the management unit (11) is adapted:

- to compute a franking price for franking a parcel placed in a determined locker on the basis of the data delivered by the input means (14), and of the indication of the weight of said parcel as transmitted by the weight sensor (9a, 9b), when a position detector (5) associated with a door (3) of said determined locker (2) detects that the door is closed;
- to cause the door of said locker to be locked once the computed franking price has been paid; and
- to keep the door of said locker locked until the management unit recognizes a parcel retrieval code which has been delivered to it by the data input means.

2. Parcel-franking apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the management unit (11) includes memory means (22) adapted to store tables of franking rates corresponding to various types of destinations and/or to various types

of shipping services, the management unit being adapted to compute the franking price by means of a rate selected from the data delivered by the input means (14).

5 3. Parcel-franking apparatus according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the management unit (11) includes memory means (23) adapted to store a plurality of predetermined shipping companies and a table associating a determined locker with a predefined shipping company, the management
10 unit being adapted to record the association of a particular locker (2) with a predefined shipping company on the basis of the data delivered by the input means (14).

15 4. Parcel-franking apparatus according to claim 3, wherein the management unit (11) is adapted to cause the doors (3) of all of the lockers (2) associated with a predefined shipping company to be unlocked, once a retrieval code transmitted by the data input means (14)
20 has been recognized.

25 5. A method of implementing parcel-franking apparatus according to claim 1, said method comprising a franking operation, in which method the franking operation comprises the following steps:

- waiting for information indicating that the door of a determined locker (2) is closed; then
- computing a franking price for franking a parcel placed in said determined locker on the basis of the data
30 delivered to the input means (14) and by means of the indication of the weight of said parcel as transmitted by the weight sensor (9a, 9b); then
- paying the franking price as previously computed;
and
- locking the door of said determined locker.

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6. A method according to claim 5, wherein the franking operation further comprises, prior to the step of waiting for a closed signal:

- selecting the determined locker (2) from among the available lockers by the management unit (11); then
 - unlocking the lock (4) of said determined locker by the management unit (11).

7. A method according to claim 5 or claim 6, wherein the management unit (11) is provided with memory means (22) adapted to store tables of franking rates corresponding to different types of destination and/or to different types of shipping services, and wherein the computing step of the franking operation further comprises at least one of the following sub-steps:

- displaying various types of destination stored by the management unit, followed by using the input means (14) to select a type of destination, and applying the corresponding franking rate to computation of the franking price; and

- displaying various types of destination stored by the management unit, followed by using the input means (14) to select a type of shipping service and applying the corresponding franking rate to computation of the franking price.

8. A method according to any one of claims 5 to 7, wherein the management unit is provided with memory means (23) adapted to store a plurality of predefined shipping companies and a table associating a determined locker with a predefined shipping company, and in which the franking operation further comprises the following step:

- displaying various predefined shipping companies, followed by using the input means (14) to select a predefined shipping company, and associating said company with the determined locker.

9. A method according to any one of claims 5 to 8, wherein the franking operation further comprises, between the waiting step for waiting for information indicating that the door (3) of the determined locker (2) is closed
5 and the locking step for locking said door that follows the payment step for paying for the franking price, a step consisting in:

- interrupting the franking operation in the event that the position detector (5) issues information
10 indicating that said door is open.

10. A method according to any one of claims 5 to 9, wherein the management unit (11) is provided with memory means (23) which are adapted to store a table associating
15 at least one locker (2) with at least one predefined shipping company, and in which a retrieval operation is also provided for retrieving at least one parcel, said retrieval operation comprising the following steps:

- recognizing a retrieval code associated with the
20 predefined shipping company by the management unit (11); and

- opening said at least one locker (2) associated with said shipping company.

25 11. A method according to claim 10, wherein the retrieval operation further comprises, after the recognition step for recognizing a retrieval code, the following step:

- printing at least one franking label for the parcel contained in said at least one locker.

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12. A method according to claim 10 or claim 11, wherein the contents of a plurality of lockers (2) are associated with the same shipping company, and wherein the retrieval operation for retrieving the parcels further comprises,
35 after the recognition step for recognizing a code associated with said shipping company, the following steps:

- unlocking the door (3) of a first one of said lockers (2);
- waiting for information indicating that the door of the first one of said lockers is in the open position;

5 followed by:

- waiting for information indicating that the door of said first one of said lockers is closed; then
 - unlocking the door of a second one of said lockers (2).

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13. A method according to claim 10 or 11, wherein the contents of a plurality of lockers (2) are associated with the same shipping company, and wherein the retrieval operation for retrieving the parcels further comprises, 15 after the recognition step for recognizing a code associated with said shipping company, the following steps:

- unlocking the door (3) of a first one of said lockers (2);
- waiting for the weight sensor (9a, 9b) to transmit a weight indication indicating that the weight of the contents of the first one of said lockers is substantially zero; then
 - unlocking the door of a second one of said lockers (2).